DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 241 433 SO 015 489

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TITLE Paideia: Origins.
PUB DATE 25 Nov 83
NOTE 10p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Council for the Social Studies (San Francisco, CA, November 25, 1983).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Child Rearing; Educational History; *Educational Objectives; Educational Philosophy; *Educational Practices; Elementary Secondary Education; *Equal Education; *Greek Civilization; Greek Literature
IDENTIFIERS Adler (Mortimer); *Paideia Proposal

ABSTRACT

The ideas in Mortimer Adler's educational manifesto, "The Paideia Proposal," are compared to the Greek concept of paideia (meaning upbringing of a child) and discredited. Committed to universal education, Adler wants schooling based on a set of uniformly applied objectives achieved by packaging pre-organized knowledge in established areas of study. Adler would have been comfortable in ancient Greece, for they too had their world under control. Both the Athenian and the Spartan concepts of paideia were the same: all students were subjected to the same objectives; the curriculum was universal and administered with equal treatment of all. There was no individual choice. For example, in Athens the ideas of the sophists who challenged traditional educational practices were received merely as ideas. Although they might enrich social exchanges in the agora, ideas were hardly the stuff from which social reform might flow. Adler's proposal parallels the Athenian treatment of the sophists, i.e., it removes the social dimension from study. The educational process in his manifesto is one of cultural replication, but it does not promote growth. (RM)

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PAIDEIA: ORIGINS

Presented at the Annual Meeting
of the National Council for the Social Studies

San Francisco
November 25, 1983

SO 015 489

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Paideia: Origins

> Knowledge is a model we construct to give meaning and structure to regularities in experience. The organizing ideas of any body of knowledge are inventions [emphasis mine] for rendering experience economical and connected. We invent concepts such as force in physics, the bond in chemistry, motives in psychology, style in literature as means to the end of comprehension.[1]

Jerome Bruner is suggesting that we are making choices. He is also implying, paradoxically, that we have no choice in the matter, for without our invention of the world we are left with two alternatives. We can accept a world that comes to us--unprocessed, raw material, the Faulknerian vision of Benjy in The Sound and the Fury--where the past is always in the present and life is a series of sense impressions. It is the world of "naive empiricism" which Jakobson refers to when he relates Odoevskyj's story of

> a man who received from a malevolent magician the gift of being able to see everything and to hear everything: 'Everything in nature became fragmented before him, and nothing formed into a whole in his mind', and for this unfortunate man the sounds of speech became transformed into a torrent of innumerable articulatory motions and of mechanical vibrations, aimless and without meaning.[2]

But that does not happen. "For, as Einstein says . . . : the eternally incomprehensible thing about the world is its comprehensibility."[3] One might add, "and our inclination to comprehend."

The first alternative hardly poses any threat to us as social studies teachers. Neither our most eager students, rejoicing in the world they create as they express, nor those

whose semi-ccmatism, induced by our exhortations, allows them to retreat to the seclusion of the self, are able to resist the "rage for order."[4]

The other alternative is the one proposed by Mortimer Adler in The Paideia Proposal, his "educational manifesto." It is painfully appropriate that the "manifesto" should appropriate the Greek notion of paideia ("from the Greek pais, paidos: the upbringing of a child . . . , the equivalent of the Latin humanitas . . . , signifying the general learning that should be the possession of all human beings").[5] For the Greeks, paideia has extended beyond schooling or formal education. It has been the manifestation of a culture and, as the Greeks practiced it, enforced enculturation. It is the Greek attempt to resurrect the essence of the past in the service of the present with confidence in a future that has been secured.

In his manifesto, Adler asserts that the inequalities in contemporary schooling practices threaten the foundations of a democratic heritage that can be maintained only through a commitment to universal education. The education that he calls for begins with schooling based on a set of uniformly applied objectives. The objectives would be achieved by packaging pre-organized knowledge in established areas of study and imposing that knowledge on children who will be "coached" and drilled in the three R's before they are ready for the "enlarged understanding" that will come from Socratic questioning related to experience with the great books and

participation in the arts.

Adler would have been comfortable in ancient Greece. The Greeks had their world under control. They accepted the reality of "an ideal of human personality."[6] Their task was not to invent worlds, but to approximate the ideal that had always been. Individuals took on roles in a communal setting. Plutarch tells us that the vulnerability of the self began at birth:

> [When a child was born the father] was obliged to carry it before certain triers . . .; some of the elders of the tribe to which the child belonged; their business it was carefully to view the infant, and if they found it stout and well made, they gave order for its rearing, . . . but, if they found it puny and ill-shaped, ordered it to be taken to . . . a . . . chasm under Taygetus; as thinking it neither for the good of the child itself, nor for the public interest, that it should be brought up, if it did not, from the very outset, appear made to be made healthy and vigorous.[7]

Whether the ideal was Platonic or Aristotelian, it served the Greeks well. Some early recorded notions of Greek forms come to us from Homer. We read of omnicient gods and the heroes who emulate them. It is here that we may begin to understand the Greek <u>areté</u>, the combination of honor, courage, noble bearing, loyalty, and physical strength complemented with good judgment found in the perfected form of Greek character. When Patroclus, failing to heed the advice of Achilles, is killed by Hector and stripped of Achilles' armor it becomes encumbent upon Achilles to restore the honor of his friend and his people in turn by slaying Hector. Grecian heroes must die with honor and be honored in death. Patroclus is afforded the

funereal pageantry befitting his station while the slain Hector is desecrated by Achilles. Achilles listens to reason, however, and allows the Trojans to reclaim Hector's body. The Trojans conduct the appropriate final celebration for their hero and equilibrium is restored.[8] The epic contains everything the Greeks demand: noble deeds, physical strength, unswerving loyalty, and compassion. There is the ritual of battle, celebration of life, and the ceremony honoring the Greek vitality in death. Everything is perfect and predictable. The Greek notion of paideia is complete; the heroes fulfill all expectations.

Jaeger sees the Greek paideia as "a consciously pursued ideal"[9] . . . "established as a formative principle."[10] This is easiest to illustrate by looking at the Spartan traditions. As the relatively small polis extended its control over neighboring territory it became increasingly important for optimum use of human resources. Lycurgas is usually credited with solving this problem by suggesting an educational reform not unlike that proposed by Adler. All people would be subjected to the same objectives. The curriculum was universal and administered with equal treatment of all. The citizens of Sparta would form an army in the service of the state.

The Spartans' system was communal. Boys became members of education groups at seven and left the home for communal quarters at twelve. The body was molded along with the mind. According to Plutarch, the older boys

> were no longer allowed to wear any undergarments. They had one coat to serve them a year; their bodies were hard and dry, with but little acquaintance of baths and unguents. [Their food intake was controlled] that they might grow taller; . . . the body giving and yielding because it is pliant, grows in height. . . . Just as we find women who take physic while they are with child, bear leaner and smaller but better-shaped and prettier children; the material they come from being more pliable and easily molded.[11]

The Athenian paideia was similar in many respects to that of Sparta. It has been suggested that here, too, imperfect infants might be left to die. The curriculum was the same for all: boys were instructed in physical activity; in reading, ~~reading,~~ writing, and speaking; and in music and poetry. Girls were usually prepared for home management. It was clear that education was viewed as a means for maintaining and perpetuating the stability of the state. The paideia dictated a social system in which merchants begot merchants and nobles begot nobility.[12]

The Athenians' was not a system in which individual choice prevailed. This might be illustrated by looking to the experience of the sophists who dared to challenge traditional education practices. In Clouds, Aristophanes offers a satirical treatment that provides both an exegesis of the sophist position and an indication of the nature of the opposition to it. The person forsaking tradition in favor of new notions is told,

> your skin will become pallid and thin; physically you'll be pathetic, haggard and lank; you'll never stop quibbling, proving that black's white and good's bad and day's night and God knows what else.[13]

It seems that the sophists were promoting an informed skepticism that might lead to the restructuring of a social system. Their ideas were received merely as ideas, however. Reflection was the luxury afforded to the leisured class. Although they might enrich social exchanges in the agora, ideas were hardly the stuff from which social reform might flow. According to Jaeger,

> The true Greek paideia, . . . starts from the ideal not from the individual . . . , and that ideal was the pattern [emphasis mine] toward which Greek educators as well as Greek poets, artists, and philosophers always looked. . . . the universally valid model of humanity which all individuals are bound to imitate.[14]

A common practice in attempts to discredit positions with which we disagree is to resort to the "old etymological ruse"; i.e., we look to the origins of a word to cast doubt on its current usage. That is not my tactic with paideia. I am convinced that Adler has selected the most appropriate descriptor for his manifesto. His notion is of a "universal model which all individuals are bound to imitate." Such a notion belies the essential characteristic of individuality--responsible autonomy--and substitutes mindless imitation.

My concern with Adler's proposal is that it parallels the Athenian treatment of the sophists; i.e., it removes the social dimension from study. We are left with a seductively

attractive alternative: a clear, concise form with well defined parameters. That the form may have no relation to what it is that we may do if we are inclined to make choices as we interact in a complex world is of no significance. What prevails is the idea of study. Our experience in the world is reduced to a body of knowledge which can be controlled. The exercise of this control identifies us as "educated." The process is one of cultural replication but it does not promote growth. Under this circumstance people are engaged in realizing what it has been determined that they are, rather than what they might be in the process of becoming.

We may take comfort in the knowledge that there is no risk in Adler's system. Socrates may have feigned ignorance but he never asked a question he couldn't answer. People were pawns to be manipulated. With a model like this, Adler can't miss. As was the case with Socrates,

He'll teach them <u>good</u>.

Endnotes

[1]Jerome S. Bruner, "After John Dewey, What?" (Cambridge, Mass.: President and Fellows of Harvard College, 1962), p. 9.

[2]Roman Jakobson, <u>Six Lectures on Sound and Meaning</u> (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1978), p. 20.

[3]Gerald Holton, "'What, precisely, is "thinking"?' Einstein's answer," <u>Readings for MOSAIC</u> (Geneva, New York: Hobart and William Smith Colleges, 1983), p. 322.

[4]Wallace Stevens, "The Idea of Order at Key West," The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens (New York: Random House, 1982). vi. 1.

[5]Mortimer Adler, The Paideia Proposal (New York: Macmillan, 1982), p. v.

[6]Werner Jaeger, Paideia: the Ideals of Greek Culture, Translated by Gilbert Highet (New York: Oxford University Press, 1939), vol. 1, p. vii.

[7]Plutarch, "Lycurgus," The Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans, Translated by John Dryden (New York: Modern Library, 1932), p. 62.

[8]Homer Illiad XVI-XXIV.

[9]Jaeger, op. cit., p. xvii.

[10]Ibid., p. xviii.

[11]Plutarch, op. cit., pp. 63-64.

[12]Robin Barrow, Greek and Roman Education (New York: Macmillan, 1976), pp. 31-36.

[13]Ibid., p. 51.

[14]Jaeger, op. cit.